



Legacy for the Future

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal agency through which the federal government carries out its responsibilities to conserve, protect, and enhance the nation's fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of people. The Service's major responsibilities are for migratory birds, endangered species, certain marine mammals, and fish.



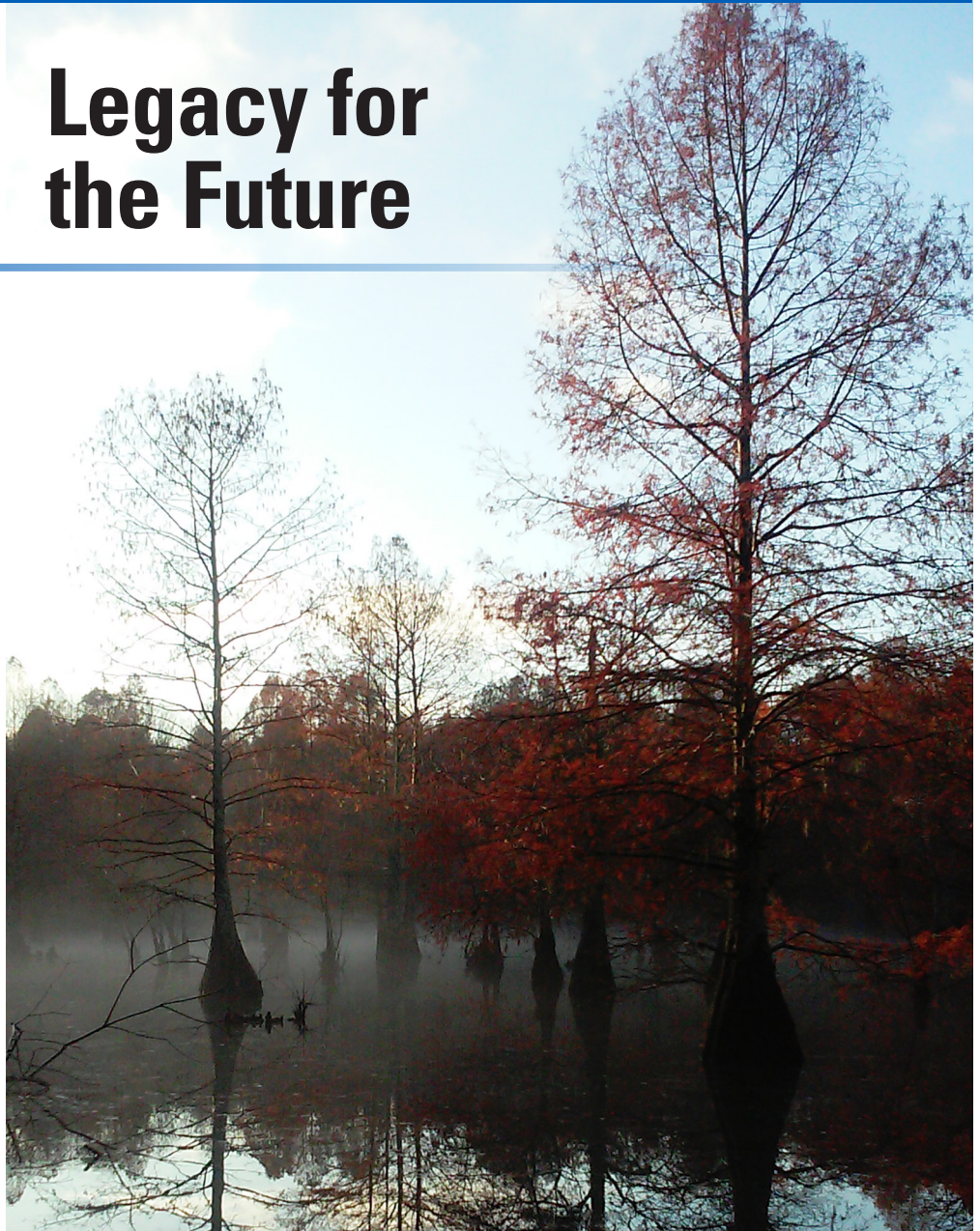
Zebra Swallowtail on Butterfly Weed at Town Swamp

Service efforts over the last 90+ years to protect wildlife and their habitats have resulted in a network of protected areas that form the National Wildlife Refuge System. This network of protected areas is the largest and most diverse in the world. Its lands provide essential habitat for numerous wildlife species, numbers of recreational opportunities for the public, and a variety of benefits to local communities.

The Land Acquisition Process

The Refuge System includes refuges in all 50 states. Most of these were established or expanded through land acquisition. This process is ongoing and will continue as new areas of high biological value are identified for protection.

The Service, in its mission to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats through the Refuge System, conducts in-depth evaluations of certain areas of interest identified in existing resource plans, or brought to our attention by individuals. Teams made up of biologists, researchers, planners, and realty specialists evaluate a myriad of factors that determine a refuge



Askev Cypress Swamp

boundary including, but not limited to, biology and ecology of an area, existing land uses, land values, area economy and the needs of the people.

Recommendations are provided to decision makers on establishment of new refuges, additions to existing units, and/or expansion of refuge boundaries which define important and/or sensitive areas that could be protected and managed as a unit of the Wildlife Refuge System. These proposals are then approved by the Service's Director or Regional Director depending on the size of the project and whether or not a new refuge is being established. There are many opportunities for the public to participate in the establishment or expansion of existing refuges.

The Service is required by law to involve you in the process.

Once the refuge boundary is approved the Service proceeds to contact all the landowners within the boundary to determine if they are interested in selling their land. If the landowner expresses an interest in selling to the Service, a professional real estate appraiser will conduct an appraisal to determine the market value of the property. When the value is determined, the Service meets with the landowner to present the value. If the landowner agrees with the offer, the purchase agreement is signed and the Service begins the process of acquiring the property.

Generally, the Service acquires title to a property in simple fee (full

ownership). Other options may be available on a particular project such as conservation easements, leases, or life-use reservations. In the latter, the owner reserves the right to live on and use part of the property for the remainder of his/her life. Owners sometimes choose to donate all or a portion of their land because of tax advantages or as a lasting memorial.

Funds for the acquisition of National Wildlife Refuges generally come from three accounts established by law: The Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund. Sources of revenue for these accounts include Federal duck stamp sales, refuge entrance fees, Fish and Wildlife fines, import taxes on arms and ammunition, offshore oil and gas leases, and Congressional appropriations.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Land Acquisition Process

Does the Service buy at fair market value?

Yes, the Service is required by law to offer fair market value for lands to be acquired. This estimate of value is based upon a professionally-prepared appraisal that is reviewed and approved by an experienced review appraiser. This review assures that the price offered is reflective of the sale prices of comparable properties in the vicinity.

Will I be reimbursed for expenses incurred in selling?

Yes. The Service strives to minimize or eliminate any adverse impact on the landowner due to the acquisition process. The Service pays for title evidence, mortgage pre-payment penalties, mortgage releases, boundary surveys, recording fees, relocation assistance, and moving costs (if applicable), and other expenses incidental to the transfer of title. However, it cannot pay for realtor brokerage fees or for fees charged by



Juvenile Anhingas at Askew

attorneys retained by the landowner.

What if I don't want to sell my land?

Project boundaries only identify important and sensitive resource areas. Private land remains in the control of the owner until such time as the owner decides to sell the property. Although the Service has the power of eminent domain (condemnation), it rarely exercises this authority. Nationally, less than one percent of ownerships have been acquired through this type of action. Emphasis is placed on working with willing sellers.

Will Federal acquisition help or hurt my community?

Although land acquired by the Service is removed from tax rolls, the affected county or other taxing authority receives annual revenue sharing payments. These are equal to one of the following, whichever is largest: 75 cents per acre, three-quarters of one percent of the fair market value, or twenty-five percent of net refuge receipts. The market value is updated every five years. If refuge receipts are insufficient to allow full payment, the disbursement may be reduced proportionally. Congress may appropriate additional funds to ensure full payments.

Refuges can benefit communities in many ways. Wildlife Refuges in the United States are visited 46.5 million times a year, by birdwatchers, photographers, educators and researchers, hunters, fishers, and hikers. These visitors are an important source of revenue for the local economy. Refuges also enhance the quality of life for local residents, both preserving the region's aesthetic beauty and affording numerous recreational and

educational opportunities.

If I sell my land will the Service help me to move my residence, farm, and/or business?

You will not be asked to move until your property has been acquired and relocation assistance is given to find a suitable replacement property. Any relocation benefit paid to you will be in addition to the fair market price paid for the land. The amount you receive for relocation assistance will be determined by your specific situation, by housing available and other conditions in your local area, and by decisions you make



Green snake

concerning the replacement property.

What Can I Do?

- Get involved—by providing input on proposed refuge projects.
- Contact your local refuge office and volunteer to help with education and conservation programs.
- Work with your local Planning Department to identify critical wildlife habitat and preserve it for future generations.



*Broad-headed skink,
credit USFWS/Matt Connolly*

All photos credit USFWS/Rose Railey